

High Calling of Christ-like Servanthood
Matthew 20:20-28 (1984 NIV)

20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

21 "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

22 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered.

23 Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

24 When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

25 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave -

28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Introduction

This is the account of a mother who wanted only the best for her sons. Because she loved them and was proud of them. She also had great dreams for them, and so she came to Jesus one day with an audacious request. She asked that when Jesus reigns in His Kingdom, He would have one of her sons seated on His right and the other seated on His left. She wanted her sons to have the places of highest honour next to Jesus.

Let's face it, we live in an ambitious world. Life is very much about winning and losing. That's why we keep score. That's why we love sports and games. And that's why this mother came to Jesus. In the competitive game of life, she wanted to make sure her sons came out ahead. If that meant asking for a favour from the Lord, she was glad to do it because she believed her sons deserved it. She had big dreams and her sons had great ambitions—this is an illustration of a “kiasu” mother and her “kiasu” sons in Bible times.

However, ambition itself is not evil. If you don't have any ambition, why bother getting out of bed in the morning? You might as well stay in bed and sleep all day. Ambition is, in a sense, a strong regard for a desired future. As such, it can be positive; it can be helpful if we are ambitious for the right things.

What are your ambitions? What do you dream about? What are you hoping to fulfil in life? The setting of our text is crucial. This event (which is recorded in both Mathew and Mark) occurred near the end of Jesus' ministry. In fact, it took place about a week before the crucifixion as Jesus and His disciples

were walking towards Jerusalem. While Jesus was coming to grips with the bloody death that loomed before Him, His top men were trying to “fish” from Him higher positions in His coming Kingdom.

Yet who can blame them? I mean everyone wants to be somebody. And we say (or at least we think), “I don’t mind serving a big somebody but I don’t want to be seen by others as a small servant. So, I want to be seen seated next/near to that big somebody.” “Lord, I want to be your loyal servant. So let me sit nearest to you to attend to your needs readily.”

With that as background, let’s consider the conversation of this mother and her two sons with Jesus Christ. Let’s first consider the theme of high ambition in this conversation.

I. High Ambition (vv. 20-21)

“Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ‘What is it you want?’ he asked. She said, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom’” (Matthew 20:20-21).

While it is easy to criticize this woman, in reality she was doing what any mother would do. All she really wanted was for her sons to do well and get ahead in life. Many Bible commentators suggest that this “mother of Zebedee’s sons” was also the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. If that is true, then James and John were cousins of Jesus and the mother was Jesus’ aunt. If that is the case, then perhaps she thought Jesus would take care of His own family members before others.

So this mother came to Jesus with her two grown-up sons. The parallel passage in Mark 10 makes it clear that these two men had the same question in mind. It’s obvious that they and their mother had discussed all this earlier.

The mother knelt humbly before Jesus and asked with great respect that James and John be given the seats of highest honour in the coming Kingdom. At this point, we come up against a danger all parents often face—we want our children to fulfil our dreams instead of God’s calling for them. Parents tend to guide or force their children into a mould of their own choosing—perhaps to achieve that dream/ambition that they themselves have failed to attain in life.

Having said that, I should add that there are arguments in favour of this mother and her two sons:

- First, she clearly believed that Jesus would one day have His own Kingdom. But not many people believed that about Jesus. He didn’t look or act or sound like a typical king. To many people, he seemed like just another itinerant rabbi from Galilee. His followers were more like a ragtag band than a royal entourage. Yet this mother saw past all this superficiality to the day when Jesus would indeed reign in His own

Kingdom. So, let's give her due credit—she believed when most people doubted.

- Second, it's clear that Jesus loved her sons. He even gave them a nickname—the “sons of thunder”, probably because they had served the Lord with fervent and fiery commitment as they ministered alongside Him.
- Third, James and John (together with Peter) were clearly the top three among all the other disciples. When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, His only witnesses were Peter, James and John.

If you read the other gospels, it's clear that there was an ongoing competition among the disciples all the way until the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room the night before Jesus was crucified. This means the other disciples very much wanted those seats of honour as well. These were very competitive men. They were keeping score in order to get ahead of one another.

The basic problem with James and John here is that they underestimated the cost of following Christ and they overestimated their own importance. They didn't ask for work in the coming Kingdom (which would be a nobler request). Rather, they asked only for a place of honour. Seniority was their plea—“Lord, we've been here longer than anyone except maybe Peter!”

And they probably thought the Kingdom was coming soon so they wanted to get their applications in early. To use a phrase from the university admissions process, they wanted “early decision” by Jesus. And perhaps they intended to bank on family ties to get a high place via DSA (“Direct School Admission” in the Singapore education system).

So, what would Jesus say to their brash request? We now examine the theme of high cost in their conversation.

II. High Cost (vv. 22-23)

“‘You don't know what you are asking,’ Jesus said to them. ‘Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?’ ‘We can,’ they answered. Jesus said to them, ‘You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father’” (Matthew 20:22-23).

Note that Jesus didn't rebuke the mother or her sons. And He also didn't deny His coming Kingdom or that there would be seats of honour. Jesus simply told them that they didn't know what they were asking for. Then He asked the men if they could drink the cup he's about to drink. With either faith or foolishness, they replied seemingly without hesitation, “We can!” Very confident they were—brave and honest, but perhaps not very smart. Indeed, sometimes our perspective gets a bit out when we forget our limitations.

Muhammed Ali was on a plane and the stewardess asked him to buckle his seat belt. He said to her, “Superman don't need no seat-

belt.” The stewardess quickly answered, “Superman don’t need no airplane either.”

(<https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/1233393/float-like-a-butterfly-sting-like-a-bee-his-hands-cant-hit-what-his-eyes-cant-see-the-late-muhammad-alis-greatest-quotes>)

Jesus didn’t turn down or put down James and John. He didn’t say, “Forget about it. You’ll never have a place of honour at my table.” He merely raised the bar by cautioning them, “You want to sit next to me? Fine. Here’s what it will cost you—partaking the bitter cup with me.” But James and John assumed their suffering was over and their work was done. They were wrong on both counts. Their suffering was still ahead of them and their work was just starting.

The concept of the “cup” in the Bible speaks of an intense personal experience. It’s the same image Jesus used in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prayed that the “cup of suffering” that He was about to drink might be taken from Him. That “cup” was the burden of bearing the sins of the world. In the parallel passage in Mark 10:35-45, Jesus also mentioned the “baptism” He was about to undergo. That does not refer to water baptism but to a full immersion in suffering that He would experience on the cross. He so loved us that He took the cup of God’s wrath by suffering and dying on the cross for our sake as willingly as a thirsty man would take a cup of water!

In the verses just before this conversation (see Matthew 20:17-19), Jesus explained to His disciples that He would be betrayed, arrested, falsely accused, mocked, beaten, spat upon, and ultimately crucified. He went to Jerusalem with full knowledge of what was about to transpire. When Jesus challenged James and John to join Him in drinking the cup and taking His baptism, He was calling them to suffer in His name and for His sake. Only He could pay for the sins of the world, but they could and would suffer with Him by being faithful to Him. This was what the disciples were asked to look forward to, instead of high places or rewards, if they truly wanted to follow and serve Jesus Christ.

Jesus also informed James and John that He wasn’t in charge of the seating arrangement in the Kingdom. He’s the host, but the God the Father would handle the seating plan. And what happened down the pages of church history is that James became the first apostle to die. He was put to death by Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12. John was the last apostle to die. He ended up in exile on the island of Patmos. It’s almost as if Jesus was saying to them, “Only God the Father will decide who can sit on my right and who can sit on my left. If you want to follow and serve me, I can only say that you will suffer like me, and in my name and for my sake, one of you will die first and the other will die last.”

Jesus’ “job expectation” of His disciples (and of us today who follow and serve Him) is this—if you follow and serve Jesus, you’ll work long and hard and the

“pay” won’t necessarily make you rich. But the retirement benefits are literally “out of this world”. That’s the deal. Do you want in or not?

James and John wanted to talk about the coming glory, but Jesus replied by forewarning them about their suffering. Here we come to the bottom line—are we willing to pay the high cost in order to follow and serve Christ? If the answer is “yes”, then we can also share in the coming rewards after our “retirement” from earth. But our “yes” shouldn’t be uttered in haste, like what James and John did. We can only make this kind of commitment when we truly believe we have found a calling worth giving our life for.

Where do you desire to sit in God’s Kingdom? Wherever you desire to sit, the most important thing about God’s Kingdom is this:

- Make sure you’re there!
- Don’t get left out.
- Once you get in, you can check the seating plan.
- Don’t worry—every table is near Jesus.
- And everyone will have an unobstructed view of the Lord.

Moving on, let’s now examine the theme of high standard in this conversation.

III. High Standard (vv. 24-28)

“When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Matthew 20:24-28).

Now the disciples started to argue among themselves. I’m sure the other 10 were angry with James and John for going to Jesus before them. The whole episode begins with the request by the mother of James and John, and ends with a heated dispute among the disciples. It’s all humanly natural because we humans are born to compete, to fight for the top spot, to bring down others to be number one. Winning and losing is very much what life is all about in this world. Whether we admit it or not, getting ahead of others is a major motivation in many things we do. So, let’s not be too quick to condemn the disciples in our own self-righteousness.

Once again Jesus didn’t condemn these other 10 disciples. He used their bickering as a “teachable moment” to challenge them to channel their ambition in a new direction. Ambition has become something of a “dirty word” because it implies an overwhelming desire for personal advancement regardless of the cost; regardless of who is hurt in the process. Ambition to get ahead has led some to cut corners, lie in their reports, spread malicious gossips, abuse their authority, and stab others in the back.

©2020-2023 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

Jesus knew all about men and women like that. And He understood that His followers would be tempted to use the same tactics. With four simple words He denounced that kind of ambition in v. 26, “Not so with you.” Then He painted an entirely different picture of ambition, “Do you want to be a leader? That’s great because the world needs good leaders. Here’s what I want you to do. Become a servant. Pick up a towel and start washing dirty feet. Think of yourself as a bond servant and not a bossy master.” With this radically different picture, Jesus offered a complete rejection of the world’s way of being ambitious—instead of using people, we are to serve people.

The church has often struggled much with these words of Jesus. Every church has leaders with some titles. And titles aren’t necessarily bad. However, even a title like “Reverend” can cause one to think that he stands in a special, privileged place that elevates him above others.

I don’t think Jesus is attacking the concept of leaders with authority per se. After all, it is not good for a church to be leaderless. The words of our text actually point to the true source of God-pleasing authority—God-pleasing authority is not so much about mere leadership, but leadership that demonstrates God-pleasing servanthood. Yes, Jesus accepts the premise that ambition can be good and godly. It’s a good thing to want to lead, especially if you want to lead in Jesus’ way. A real leader asks how he can serve the needs of others, and he does what needs to be done without making a big deal about it. Based on that, here is a very important principle for choosing leaders—when looking for a leader, be sure to ask, “Can this person lead, and can he lead with a servant heart?”

Verse 28 summarizes an important Christian message—Jesus came to serve us so that we can serve others. Would you like to be a leader? Then you need first to learn to be a servant.

Jesus is the ultimate servant and He is not only our example, He is also our servant. It is not only the disciples’ feet that were washed. Our feet are also washed by Him every time we come to Him for cleansing from our sin. The Lord of glory came to serve us so that we might be able to serve others in His divine power, grace and love. He is not only the example of servanthood, but also the servant who empowers and enables us to serve in His name. And in this we see a wonderful truth of the Christian faith—what the Lord demands, He supplies.

The final phrase of verse 28 brings us to the very heart of the gospel. Christ gave “his life a ransom for many”. The word “ransom” refers to the price paid to redeem a slave or a prisoner. It speaks of our wretched condition because of sin. That price was paid to satisfy divine justice so that our punishment might be averted. It cost Christ His very life offered up in a bloody sacrifice on the cross. Christ the innocent suffered in the place of the guilty so that by His perfect life and bloody death, He might pay the price of our sin. He took the

divine punishment meant for us. He died for “all” but only the “many” who are called will respond in true saving faith.

Suppose you ask, “Am I included in the ‘many’? Is there room for me?” Without doubt, the answer is always “yes”. You will be counted in the “many” if you come to Christ in simple saving faith because you will not be turned away.

Conclusion

Let me wrap up with a few questions to reflect and consider:

- In your aspiring, are you willing to serve instead of rule?
- In your growing, are you willing to serve before you rule?
- In your leading, are you willing to serve as you rule?

As I end, let me read again the words of Jesus in vv. 26-27, “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

High leadership success, especially God-pleasing leadership, is very much about first endorsing and embracing the high calling of Christ-like servanthood. And Jesus Christ is our greatest example and enabler. We are called to follow and serve Him, and we are often helpless without Him and His enabling. But in Him all things are possible.

Let’s daily seek the Lord to help us as we obey the high calling of Christ-like servanthood. Amen!